

STATE OF GUANAJUATO

Guanajuato is situated within the Bajío (lowland), a valley region that also includes parts of Michoacán and Querétaro states and is referred to as the "heartland of Mexico" because of its geographically central location. In a country where the land often is unsuitable for agriculture, it is one of Mexico's most productive farming areas. Such staple crops as corn and beans have been grown for more than 3,000 years.

The state of Guanajuato has played an important role in Mexican history. Spanish explorers capitalized upon the region's abundant mineral resources, particularly silver, and built Mexico's first colonial cities. And it was in

the town of Dolores Hidalgo that Father Miguel Hidalgo first declared Mexico's freedom from Spain in his 1810 proclamation *Grito de Dolores*—although independence would not be achieved until 11 long years later.

POINTS OF INTEREST

DOLORES HIDALGO (A-8)

elev. 6,517'

Known in Mexico as "Cuna de la Independencia Nacional" (The Cradle of National Independence) and designated a national historic monument, Dolores Hidalgo (doh-LOH-rehs ee-DAHL-goh) lies in the valley of the Río Laja. Just before midnight on Sept. 15, 1810, Father Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla called together his parishioners by ringing the village church bell. He then gave the venerated *Grito de Dolores*, a speech announcing Mexican independence that ignited the 11-year war to achieve it. A statue of Hidalgo stands in the town's main plaza, where various vendors ply their wares among comfortable old benches and square-trimmed trees.

Dolores Hidalgo contains the former homes of other Mexican heroes; guides are available for tours of the town. The annual *Independence Day* celebrations held Sept. 15-16 re-create this historic event.

CASA DE DON MIGUEL HIDALGO (Home of Don Miguel Hidalgo), Morelos #1 at Hidalgo, contains many items relating to the life of the patriot priest, including paintings, portraits, books and period furniture. Admission is charged.

GUANAJUATO (A-7) elev. 6,649'

Guanajuato (gwah-nah-HWAH-toh) is one of Mexico's most beautifully preserved colonial cities. Steeped in history, rich with culture and perched at the bottom of a delightfully scenic canyon, it offers numerous pleasures for the traveler. Leafy plazas, ornate mansions and

flowerpot-bedecked alleyways add to Guanajuato's charm. So much of the city's colonial aspect endures, in fact, that it has been declared a national historic monument. Guanajuato also—in an age of global information sharing and pop culture predominance—remains thoroughly Mexican in character.

Capital of the state of the same name, Guanajuato (the name means "place of frogs") was founded in 1548. Silver is its reason for being. For a while the fabulous strike at La Valenciana Mine alone supplied more than half of all the silver received by the Spanish monarchs, yet it was claimed that the mother lode was never found. Several nearby silver mines as well as some gold and lead deposits are still producing.

This mineral wealth made Guanajuato the commercial and financial center of a region known as the **Bajío**, or heartland, for its green, rolling hills and fertile farmland. Along with Querétaro, San Luis Potosí, San Miguel de Allende and Zacatecas, it was one of Mexico's richest and most important colonial cities. The establishment of a university by the Jesuits in 1732 began Guanajuato's reputation as an intellectual center and seat of learning.

Ironically, the city which had become wealthy under Spanish rule took an integral role in the struggle for Mexican independence. In 1810, Guanajuato was invaded by a motley army of peasant farmers, miners and other disenfranchised citizens under the leadership of Father Miguel Hidalgo de Costilla, venerated as the "Father of Mexican Independence." Spanish Royalists—mining barons and the landowning

elite holed up in the massive town granary, **Alhóndiga de Granaditas**, which is now a museum (see attraction listing below). Under orders from Hidalgo, a young miner nicknamed El Pípila heroically made his way to the wooden door of the fortresslike structure, setting it on fire and allowing the insurgents to storm the interior, giving them the first major military victory of the War of Independence.

Although Guanajuato was sacked and many of the town's Spanish aristocracy massacred, the revolutionaries did not remain in control for long. In 1811, Hidalgo and three of his leaders were executed near Chihuahua and their heads sent to Guanajuato to be hung on hooks protruding from the four outside corners of the granary, grisly reminders that this particular conflict was far from over. The heads remained impaled until 1821, when Mexico finally won its independence.

Happily, those Spanish legacies that remain add immeasurably to the city's picturesque air. It crowds the slopes of a dry, narrow, rugged canyon. Houses hug the canyon's different levels, with the foundation of one house sitting at the rooftop level of the one below. The Spanish architectural influence is unmistakably evident, but because Andalusians were among the early arrivals, there is a Moorish touch to some early buildings, which are painted in soft pastel colors and brightened with flower-filled window boxes.

Guanajuato's downtown core, like the centers of Oaxaca, Morelia, Querétaro and other Mexican colonial cities, maintains architectural integrity by restricting gas stations and other concessions to contemporary living to the suburbs and outlying areas. The city's twisting streets are interspersed with little plazas, perfect for relaxing on a shaded bench or perhaps chatting over coffee with one of the students who attend the prestigious **University of Guanajuato**. Narrow *callejones* (lanes) shadowed by overhanging balconies follow the contours of the hills; some are so steep in places that stairways are built into the sidewalks.

PLANNING YOUR STAY

If you're basing a vacation in Guanajuato, plan on at least 2 days to fully appreciate the city's fine museums, colonial churches and outstanding university. A third day could be spent simply enjoying the compact city center—wandering from plaza to plaza, browsing through the **Hidalgo Market** and having a leisurely dinner at one of the outdoor cafés near the centrally located **Jardín de la Unión**, a park with an old-fashioned, romantic atmosphere.

Add another day for exploring attractions in the environs, such as the **Church of La Valenciana**, the **La Valenciana Mine**, **Cubilete Mountain** or the **Mummy Museum** (see attraction listings below). Drive the **Carretera Panorámica** (Panoramic Highway), the loop road that

roughly encircles the city and offers several memorably scenic vantage points, or have a picnic at **Presa de la Olla** (Olla Dam), site of a man-made lake and the pretty gardens at Acacia Park. Allow even more time to attend performances if your visit coincides with the **International Cervantes Festival** (see "Special Events" below), held from mid- to late October; hotel reservations, however, should be booked up to 6 months in advance.

It's an easy trip from Guanajuato to several nearby colonial cities. **San Miguel de Allende** (see separate listing under Guanajuato), to the east, has a large community of American expatriates, a full slate of cultural events and a reputation as one of the best cities in Mexico to shop. **Querétaro** (see separate listing under the state of Querétaro), a bit farther southeast, is the capital of the same-named state. Another city filled with history, its colonial center has an elegant European look. **Dolores Hidalgo** (see separate listing under Guanajuato) is where Father Miguel Hidalgo issued his impassioned cry for Mexican independence, the *Grito de Dolores*.

Northwest of Guanajuato is **León**, the state's largest city. It's a sprawling industrial center, but diehard shoppers should note that it is also the country's leading producer of shoes. Spend an afternoon bargaining for footwear and leather goods at several of the many downtown shops.

For those who cannot or would rather not negotiate Guanajuato's hilly streets, **Transportes Turísticos de Guanajuato** offers guided tours of such attractions as the Church of Valenciana, the Statue of El Pípila and the Mummy Museum. The office is underneath the **Basílica Nuestra Señora de Guanajuato** (Basílica of Our Lady of Guanajuato) on Plaza de la Paz; phone (473) 2-2838 or 2-2134.

THE INFORMED TRAVELER

The nearest airport is in León, about 56 kilometers (35 miles) northwest. Aeroméxico offers flights from Mexico City; the taxi ride to Guanajuato takes about an hour. For additional information about airlines see "Arriving by Air," page 52.

Central Camionera, the main bus station, is about 6 kilometers (3.5 miles) southwest of downtown. "Deluxe" bus service is offered by ETN and Omnibus de México. There is frequent service between Mexico City's Terminal del Norte (North Bus Terminal) and Guanajuato. The Flecha Amarilla line has service from Guanajuato to San Miguel de Allende several times daily. For additional information about buses see "Bus Service," page 62.

Local buses navigate several routes. One runs from downtown east along Mex. 110, passing several hotels along the way, and heads toward the La Valenciana Church and Mine and the town of Dolores Hidalgo. Buses designated